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Scientific Knowledge through Involvement – How to Do Respectful Othering*

Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen

The theme of this article is how we as social scientists can research *others* through involvement, and develop *true* knowledge about the other without "othering" them, that is, not objectifying them or making them an instrument in our research, but rather be respectful of the other as a person. The thesis of this article is that othering is a matter of degree as well as principles. Social science and Action research can do *respectful othering.* Doing that is both a matter of personal skill and the wisdom of the researcher and of complying with some design principles. I argue that these design principles can be related to four areas of knowledge that we are likely to find in an involved research situation: knowledge about *oneself*, knowledge about *the other*, knowledge about the *relation* and knowledge about *the situation*.

Key words: involvement, respectful othering, action research, research design, knowledge

Introduction

The question I will try to discuss in this article is the following: a) how can we as social scientists research *others* through involvement, and develop *true* knowledge about the *other* without "*othering*" them, that is, not objectifying

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them or making them an instrument in our research, but rather be respectful of the *other* as a person? I use the word *involvement* to indicate that I have in mind a research situation where one is approaching the other in a personal way, trying to get a deeper understanding of the *other*, and also intending to develop knowledge in a reflective process with the *other*.

This question is closely linked to other questions of a more philosophical, sociological and theory of science kind, which I will only briefly touch upon here. For example, one could ask; b) Why should we be interested in answering this question (question a),[1] and not least c) why should Action Researchers in particular be concerned with these questions? This paper is not mainly about b) or c). Question b) and c) have been dealt with by others, also in this journal, like Shotter (2004) and Eikeland (2007).[2] However, I will have to make some references to these debates in order to position my discussion on question a). My thesis is that we can do objective research on others without *othering*, and use this insight to develop more general knowledge of society, again without *othering*. Key to this, I argue, is *how* you do your research. The article's purpose is to discuss the issue of *othering,* and present some design principles for *respectful othering* in social research.

The philosophical and sociological discourse on alienation, *othering* and objectification of the other, forms the background for question a). The issue of *not othering* others is relevant for all social science research, not only Action Research. However, they are also references to arguments by Action Researchers against some forms of conventional social research. Subse-

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1 Max Weber in his posthumous *Economy and Society* [1920] addresses the issue of subjective and objective knowledge, and also the relation between the individuals "inner world" and social science. He argued that social science should discuss meaningful social action, not the inner psychology of the individual as such. These are big, general and classical questions in social science but questions that are still often tacitly or explicitly implied in discussions between Action research and conventional social research

2 Vol. 3 in 2007 of *International Journal of Action Research* is dedicated to a discussion on Diversity of Action research – experiences and perspectives. However, this article is not about how action research can contribute to change, it is about how we can know (and evaluate) that information we get at an intimate level of communication is true and still behave as researchers in a respectful and human way.

quently, it is natural to start my discussion with a review of some main positions in current debate within Action Research on this issue.

The structure of this article is as follows: First I briefly recall some of the arguments within Action Research related to *othering*. Second I go briefly into the sociological/philosophical debate on different understandings of *othering*. Third, I give some examples from my own research on the relevance of this topic, and use organization theory as my specific reference. Fourth, I discuss how can we research others and develop *true knowledge*[3] about the other without *othering* them, that is, not objectifying them or making an instrument in our research, but rather be respectful of the other as a person? The thesis of this article is that *othering* is a matter of degree as well as principles. Social science and Action Research can do *respectful othering.* Doing that is both a matter of personal skill and the wisdom of the researcher, and of complying with some design principles.

1. Action research and the debate on "othering"

Action Research is a particular kind of scientific method, or rather a methodology, and thereby important; it is a *perspective on how to do research,* more than a method (Greenwood 2007), but it is also a scientific method for knowledge production, a method for finding out "how things are" and to give a *true* reporting of things (Johnsen 2005).[4] It is particular among others,

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[3] I use the term *truth* here in a common sense meaning, like William James who defines truth as: "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, corroborate and verify." (James 1978: 169). That is I do not go into a deeper discussion of truth as such, like Kuhn's argument that there is no truth (Williams 2001). The theory of science discourse on truth (Habermas 1998; Williams 2001; Blackburn 2005) deals with truth as an essential phenomenon (are there absolute truth?). I believe that even those who reject absolute truth in an essential sense, still commonsensical will accept that we suppose that a scientist "tells the truth", or that we can and must deal with truth in everyday matters (like; did you steal the apple?).

[4] I have previously argued (together with my colleague Roger Normann; 2004) that the action researcher has a challenge in order to identify a legitimate democratic mandate in complex environments. I have also argued (together with my colleague Roger Normann and Jens Kristian Fosse; 2005) what it implies to be an active part in promoting development. It implies to take part in a reflective process as something different from being a stakeholder or negotiating interests. Furthermore, I have argued that action

because it, in line with anti-positivistic arguments, acknowledges the *subjectivity* of the researcher, and the fact that the researcher through her research *influences* the field.

This implies that firstly Action Research is explicit on this influence, and secondly that it thereby acknowledges that research is normative, and that the researcher subsequently has an ethical responsibility to justify her role. But acknowledging subjectivity also means that there is a particular challenge to distinguish between personal and subjective knowledge and more general, objective and true knowledge.

Furthermore, the argument is that Action Research co-generates knowledge (Lincoln/Guba 1985; Heron 1996), that is:

> "Action Research is a special method because it tests ideas in practice in the context of application, and the stakeholders together evaluate the validity of the knowledge."[5]

One position to take could be to claim that co-generated knowledge more or less by itself is true in a more objective sense, or to reject the whole notion of objective truth. None of these are the positions I will develop here.

An example of how Action Research has positioned itself against conventional (positivist) research could be illustrated by the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). In their *Naturalistic Inquiry* they argue against positivism:

> "Positivism has produced research with human respondents that ignore their humanness, a fact that has not only ethical but also validity implications." (Lincoln/Guba 1985: 27).

Similar arguments are found in (Shotter 2004), who talks about (conventional-, positivistic-) research as dehumanizing.[6] Against this Lincoln and

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research is a way of producing knowledge and provide certain types of knowledge, but can and should have fruitful dialogues with other, more conventional research traditions (Johnsen 2005) and in Johnsen et al (2009) I argue together with colleagues that action research is not sufficiently legitimised with the dichotomy of local versus universal knowledge. This paper adds to this line of argument a particular perspective.

5 This formulation was given to me by Davydd Greenwood in his comments to an earlier version of this paper.

6 John Shotter (2004) has challenged traditional social research and argues that we should "… move from systems conceived of as 'logical' or as 'rational' by a special

Guba (1985) propose an *emic* research strategy, one that that tries to understand the individual from its own premises, to be involved in the other, in their own life situation, and thereby understand the other based on the others experience.[7]

However, will involved research with co-generation of knowledge be a sufficient answer to the question of how to generate true knowledge about the other? It is a dilemma to be involved and participating on the one hand, and on the other hand to observe (Searle 1995). The one is to be *in* a situation, to be a participant, the other to be *outside*, to be an observer[8]. Can Action Research overcome this dilemma? Being involved implies a very intimate observation and impressions that, by its nature, are subjective and coloured by our pre-understandings (Gadamer 2006):[9]

Olav Eikeland has argued in this journal (2007) for different positions within Action Research. One position is where research is collaborative and the researcher is strongly *reflective*. In such a situation, one can imagine that knowledge is not othering, but really a common product (co-generated) (Guba and Lincoln 1985; Greenwood 2007). An even more "extreme" position will be practitioners' research, where the researcher herself has abdicated, and the reflection (learning) is purely that of the practitioners. However, this must be regarded as an exception. As Eikeland (2007) points out, generating democratic dialogue, doing interventions and other strategies that

elite of researcher-theoreticians, to new dialogically structured practices within which all of us as ordinary people become our own research-theoreticians. (…) Otherwise, we all run the risk of becoming members of the same democracy of misery in a continuing round of mutual humiliating attempt to 'solve problems' by the application of supposed 'scientific' methods by professional elites" (Shotter 2004: 29).

7 I read this as form of *phenomenology*, that is a position on understanding how the other understands reality.

8 This is brilliantly discussed by the Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim. A well formulated essay by him, *Deltakar og Tilskodar*, is unfortunately not translated into English. However Jürgen Habermas gives a tribute to Skjervheim's work from 1959: *Objectivity and the study of man* (see Habermas 1997. 111-115)

9 Hermeneutics does not pretend to know the uniqueness of other, as Shotter (2007) argues for. Similarly, Eikeland (2007) argues that episteme always will refer to something general, not the unique.

Action Researchers often follow, requires knowledge and positioning that will implicitly assume objectification (othering). Olav Eikeland writes:

> "As I see it, however, Action Research may be understood as basically constituted in the 1940s by breaking out of the 'othering-business' – studying 'the others' – of mainstream, experimental social research, by expanding the community of inquiry and interpretation to include the subjects studied (…). I think the (potential) implications of this practical 'break out' are more radical than is often realized. Instead of a segregated 'we' ('them') of researchers studying 'them' ('us'), an expanded 'we' start to study ourselves: What are we doing to ourselves and to each other, how and why?" (Eikeland 2006)

Furthermore, he writes:

> "Are 'othering-effects' possible to eliminate completely? Hardly completely, since we all are 'others' to each other. But there are still many different degrees of 'othering', or exclusion-inclusion." (Eikeland 2006)

I would like to go a step further than Olav Eikeland does here, and claim that some sort of "*othering*" is necessary, useful and completely in line with the normative objectives of Action Research. This is in fact the starting point of my argument. Although I will not discuss if Action Research should objectivise the *other* (do "*othering*"), I will rather argue for *how objectification can be done without humiliating the other?* That is, I believe that we need to distinguish between at least two concepts of objectification, one that treats the *other* in a disrespectful way (as guinea pigs or social dopes, as it is named in the slang of experimental social research), and one that helps understand the *other* in an objective, but still respectful way. This last form of objectifying of the other (*respectful othering*) is necessary in order to develop true knowledge about society, and thereby to help developing society and the *other*, I argue.

2. Involvement, alienation and research strategies

Before I turn to the question about how to do "*respectful othering*", I will review some of the debates within social science and philosophy where the relevance of this issue is addressed. Scientific knowledge within the social

sciences, particularly within the "post-positivist" tradition, can be seen as a way of objectifying human beings, and through that, one runs into the risk of doing the service of *alienating* (Etzioni 1961), *disembedding* (Giddens 1984), *invading the lifeworld* (Habermas 1997) or *dehumanizing* (Shotter 2004) the individual (van der Berg 1998). Arguing for this risk is often linked to anti-modernist arguments. In fact a considerable part of critical (Marxian) social theory has argued for the parallel process of growth of modern capitalist society, in the sense of materialization, and that of objectification of the individual and subsequently dehumanization (alienation) (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

I will argue here that there is a close resemblance between the concepts of alienating, disembedding, invading the lifeworld and dehumanizing, and I will thereby use them interchangeably. However, I do not believe that all types of othering is equal to alienating, disembedding, invading the lifeworld and dehumanizing, nor accept that all forms of modernism has a negative, othering, effect. This needs an explanation.

Alienation in Hegel's and Marx meaning, presupposes the authentic (Taylor 1998), realizing self. The alienated or dehumanized, is the one who cannot recognize himself in the world (Safranski 2002: 116), where the world does not give meaning, or where I in the world cannot reflect on my existence, because I am not in dialogue with that world; it gives no reason or meaning to me. This dualism between *involvement* and *meaning* on the one hand and *meaninglessness*, *alienation* and *nothingness* on the other, that is found in Marxist social theory, presupposes the idea of an idealized, authentic, and true self, against which any limitation to its trueness is a threat of alienation[10]. Humans are in a constant struggle to be recognized (that is; not alienated), and this is a prime drive and process in society (Honneth 1992). However, I will show that there are more nuanced positions to be considered than the dualism between alienation and involvement

Amitai Etzioni in his 1961 work *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations: On Power, Involvement, and Their Correlates* argues that different structures (situations) have a congruent relationship with alienation and

[10] I have earlier discussed the issue of involvement in (Johnsen 2001, 2002).

involvement. In Etzioni's model, there are three levels of involvement: alienation (negative involvement, typical in relation to strangers or unfriendly situations), calculative involvement (the type of involvement found in business contract situations), and moral involvement (the type of involvement found in one's relation to the church or in teacher-pupil relations) (Etzioni 1961:10). Social context (situation), subsequently in this model defines alienation or involvement. What I find illuminating with this theory is that it makes a clear contrast between alienation and forms of involvement as different modes of *relations* defined by a *situation*.

I will *not* see this as a *deterministic* process, that a particular situation necessarily implies a specific type of involvement or automatically leads to alienation, but rather claim the other way, that context changes as we become involved. We cannot be *calculative* and truly and *morally* involved at the same time. Involvement influences our attention and, so to speak, leads our mind from the social and system world into the lifeworld. Involvement thereby has a *bounding* effect on us that is defined by the *situation*. For example: we do not normally develop deep involvement as we pass the cashier in the supermarket. The logic of that situation does not make deep involvement natural. On the other hand, a (Action) Researcher who wants to understand emotional labour in that same shop might (to some degree) get involved with the cashier.

Following Etzioni's argument, I will try to understand involvement in the sense of respectful concern about the *other*, on the background of its negation, alienation. I do this because the traditional Marxist understanding of alienation is, I believe, deliberately or tacitly a form of reference for the general discourse on this issue that has inspired the humanistic (anti-positivistic) arguments presented earlier, and also the somewhat stereotyped understandings of this phenomenon. I further mention this position, because I want to contrast it with a more modified and diverse understanding of people's both intimate and remote relations that I will try to present here.

Alienation is a prime concept within Marxism. Karl Marx was an early critique of modern work organization, in particular wage labour. The Marxist alienation concepts have two major dimensions. The first is rather materialistic and social, in stating that people develop their self-identity through work,

and since wage labour (in contrast to a self-owned farmer) decouples his/her labour from his/her living (uniqueness), with money wages as the only link between the two, he or she is alienated. Alienation is, in this case, a decoupling of *meaning system* (Gabel 1984; Honneth 1992). Alienation occurs because in a modern, mass production industry, the subject (worker) creates objects (products) that are remote and meaningless to him, because he is not part of the process of creation. The product becomes an object in the system world, something to be traded, and something where the individual worker's effort is insignificant and unidentifiable. In this sense he or she is alienated.

The second dimension of alienation is related to the idea that labour develops a universal class-consciousness and identity. To be alienated in this sense is to develop a false class-identity, to become "bourgeois" (Merton 1951). This second type of Marxist alienation forms the background of Honneth's critique of Habermas' concept of instrumental action (Honneth 1982; Outhwaite 1997:25).[11]

I mention these two understandings of alienation, the material and the cognitive (metaphysical) one, not because I want to discuss and contradict Marxism as such, but because they are references for how alienation is commonly understood. As I try to argue here, I take the position that alien-

[11] If there is something called class-consciousness, and this phenomenon is outside the instrumental sphere of the individual (which was probably the original Marxists' position, borrowed from Hegel's concept of the Geist [spirit]), then Habermas' whole concept of instrumentality is false. In a more contemporary phrasing, we might say that individuals are disembedded (alienated). As Giddens argues: "Modern institutions are seen to have taken over larger areas of social life and drained them of the meaningful content they once had. The private sphere is thus left weakened and amorphous, even though many of life's prime satisfactions are to be found there because the world of "instrumental reason" is intrinsically limited in terms of the values it can realise. Jürgen Habermas' analysis of the separation of the technical systems from the life-world is one variant of this position, as is the view set out by Max Horkheimer a generation before. Seeking of friendship and intimacy, Horkheimer argues that in organised capitalism "personal initiative plays an ever smaller role in comparison to the plans of those in authority"; personal engagement with others "remains at best, a leisure-time rifle" (Giddens 1995: 116). A slightly different, but somewhat parallel argumentation could be developed from Heidegger (2007) and his critique of instrumental reason, and subsequent endorsement of the authentic in the lifeworld (Dasein). This argument sees any instrumentality and modernity as an assault on authenticity.

ation is a more nuanced phenomenon that does *not* automatically follow from context. I reject a sort of argument that implies social determinism.[12]

3. Involvement, alienation and transformation of identity at work – a case

Let me illustrate what I have in mind, with two cases from my own practice.[13] These two cases are not representative for all my discussions and arguments, but are indications and exemplifications of where in practice one might deal with these questions. The first case (case 1) is a situation where I worked with a *union leader* in a large organizational change project in an industrial plant over many years. As we became more known to each other, and as the process evolved and became significant to the company, the union leader experienced a great personal transformation. The process he was involved in became very emotional and personal to him. The most critical point during this process that had lasted for some years and where the workers union initially had taken the role of being in a constant opposition to management, came when the general manager invited the union leader to co-operate on organizational development. Should the union leader take the chance? Should he suddenly trust the manager? If it failed, would he be regarded as a traitor by fellow workers? These where questions that he faced and that during a short period he had to decide on. As I as Action Researcher had participated in initiating the process of dialogue in the company, he called me, would like to have personal talks with me and some advise, before he made up his mind. It was very clear that this was not only a matter of a practical negotiation in the company, but for him also a matter of identity. Going into this co-operation with the management would imply a transformation of his whole conception of work relations, values and identity, he argued.

This transformation was on the one hand important for the process I had helped initiate in the company, but on the other hand involved me in a way

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[12] As I have argued above, I assume that individuals are autonomous (although often in a constrained sense) and can choose among others to be or not be involved. I thereby reject this metaphysical class consciousness concept.

[13] Both cases are more or less presented in Johnsen (2001).

that I was not prepared for. As I will argue, this case relates to my question on how should I as an Action Researcher proceed in order to handle this personal, involved situation in a respectful way.

The second case (case 2) I will use as an example was an organizational change process in a hotel I participated in over some years. The process had emphasized employees' engagement and encouraged a more personally involved and team based organization. I had one of the *team leaders* as one of my main contacts in the hotel. I interviewed her many times. After some years, our project was disrupted because the hotel changed owners and entered an international hotel chain. This hotel chain had a uniform business concept that they wanted to introduce, different from the one we had promoted. When the hotel chain started implementing their new concept, the team leader saw her work situation completely change. She had, encouraged by me and my fellow researchers in the process, developed a very personal style of management, engaged heavily in her employees, helping them also in personal matters and involved herself in, and devoted herself to, the work. She was single, without children and to a great extent "lived her life" with the job. In a very emotional interview, she told me that this new management concept was a catastrophe in her life, that all she had invested in was lost. I think this experience brought me close to what I see as the issue of the relation between a personal story, and the "truth" about the organizational change.

Before I present more of these cases, let me elaborate a little of how the issue of personal involvement is perceived in some modern organizational thinking. The modern work-situation induces a more instrumental form of action.[14] However, there are different levels of instrumentality, and subse-

[14] This can be interpreted in many ways. As is noted by du Gay (1996), the Marxian assumption of the worker as a mere production element leads to the concept of alienation. Alienation can be defined as negative involvement and is associated with concepts like "Taylorism" and "Fordism" that belong to this pre-physiological period in organizational thinking (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 121). Involvement will in this case be to re-establish a link between work and meaning, give the worker a significant role in and influence on the production process. The Human Relations movement (McGregor 1960) and the Norwegian economic democracy programme (Emery/ Thorsrud 1975) worked very much within this framework.

quently different degrees of identification and involvement in an organization. Participation, identity formation, and communication, or what Weick (1995) calls *sensemaking*, Mintzberg et al (1998) call *emergent sensemaking* and Wright et al (2000) call *resourceful sensemaking*, within firms emphasizes the contingency, embeddedness, inter-subjectivity and individuality of these involvement processes.

> "The psychological literature on attribution and social perception suggests that we form attachments to courses of action through a cognitive process of reconciling our behaviours with our beliefs and making attributions about the causes of our behaviour. The key point of this discussion is to emphasize how an organisation's HR practices (and the processes by which those practices are implemented) can affect commitment and motivation, sometimes in ways that those who design and implement those practices did not anticipate." (Baron/Kreps 1999: 102)

Following Baron and Kreps (1999), it may be argued that organizational context influences action, and it might even influence involvement, but in ways that are sometimes unpredictable. The reason for this might be the effect of individual self reflection and individual interpretation of situations.

Organization literature gives reference to both the view that identity formation is an ongoing process in the organization (Hatch and Schultz 2004), and the opposite view that individuals have multiple identities, decoupled meaning systems, and are able to distance themselves and protect themselves from this type of influence (Sturdy 1998). Following Giddens (1995), we may expect to find, in a modern workplace, not only alienation and reliance on abstract systems, but also more intimate relations and locally developed systems of trust.

This type of perspective on the organization, and its subsequent attention to the involvement of the employee, has identity-formation consequences. This is in line with Shotter's argument (Shotter 2004). As Shotter writes:

> "…I have tried to outline a more *adequate* account of what is to be a person and to bring into view the fact that the spontaneously expressed, responsive relations between us (that are rendered rationally invisible in our academic theorizing), are crucial to our personhood."

This argument resembles what Giddens (1984: 45) talks about as *discursive consciousness*. It indicates that subjectivity of expression is essential for developing a human environment.[15]

Following this argument, involvement is a factor that defines how close or remote an action is from one's inner personal self, from the emotional and mental process of self reflection (Schütz 1972). Involvement is also related to how deep and sincere our relations are with others, what *value* we put into the relations.[16] Involvement is in this sense an exposition of the human self. It is a non-calculative relation and a situation where we act in a sincere way. In Buber's terms, it can be called *inclusion* (Buber 1970). Inclusion indicates a deep personal involvement in the wellbeing of the other, an involvement that affects not only Thou, but also I. A relation based on deep involvement and real trust is characterized by inclusion, that is, a situation or a process in which I am affected by the other (Thou).[17] Deep involvement with the other means therefore both to be close to the other, but also to be committed and willing to "give" parts of your self into an activity. In that respect, you are vulnerable, you take a *risk*. There are therefore good reasons for not being involved. As Chris Argyris writes:

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[15] Restrictive environments restrain the individual's possibility to flourishing and development. Subsequently, as du Gay observes, the theory of alienation in the latter Marxist formlacks a discussion on how the individual subjects reconcile their own existence with the existence as a collective subject (du Gay 1996: 17).

[16] My argument is based on the assumption of methodological individualism, that is that the individual has a sovereign, autonomous and unique self, but that this is constrained by certain situations. I assume that we sometimes have to involve basic aspects of this self, even with the consequence that self understanding or identity is influenced and changed. Individual autonomy therefore does not mean complete freedom; it is a sort of constrained autonomy, since we are constrained by commitments and situations.

[17] In order to understand the type of trust related to this situation, it is important to pay notice to Buber's term "really mean […]." The term really is an absolute requirement. To be something really is not to make some trade-off, or some calculation or to objectify (which most often is the character of scientific knowledge) – rather, to be something really is an unconditional imperative. In its absolute sense, this is a very strong prerogative. According to Buber, we would never be able to experience absolute inclusion towards other people, only towards God. However, this does not change any of the important aspects or relevance of Buber's arguments in everyday situations.

> "Apathy, lack of interest and non-involvement are types of defense mechanisms [...]." (Argyris 1965: 89)

To get involved in a system or a person represents an investment and a risk, and therefore the possibility to be let down. The risk is both related to our own ignorance on how involvement will affect us, and also related to the undetermined development of the relation to the other.

Subsequently it is so important, and at the same time difficult, to know when to be involved and when to be alert to the other; we would not like to be over-sensitive towards the other; rather we like to be there as fellow humans when we are needed, to be sensitive when something other than everyday routines are conveyed to us, without being patronizing. Involvement is, as I see it, not the same as patronizing.

Patronizing implies that you position yourself above and outside the other, you are caring for the other. Being involved, as I defined it, is not the same as being caring. Caring can be patronizing, it can be an attitude where we place ourselves outside the other, even if we take care of her.[18] Patronizing, thereby, can be a role.[19] Caring can also be asymmetrical and patronizing, as when somebody needs help. In this case it can be both involved and understanding. So we might be able to understand the other, not from mutual dialogue and learning, but rather from empathy and identification. But the distinction between these two understandings of caring is as essential as it is difficult to observe. It should be noted that a person, like an involved researcher, might not herself be fully aware of the motives that drives her in the situation. In both of the two cases I presented earlier, it was difficult for me as a researcher to be sure of my motives. In both cases I tried to help, but on what ground did I help? Did I help because I sympathized with the persons or because I felt obliged since I was engaged in the process? Would I have

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[18] Ref. Argyris (2004): caring in Model I is patronizing, but in Model II it is not, since the caring person does not subscribe a solution for the other, but engages in a mutual relationship in order to create new possibilities.

[19] Involvement in the Buber sense referred above, on the other hand, is to really care in a symmetric relation; to be effected by the other, to let the other mean something for you, to suspend your professional thinking, your role, your mask.

helped and responded in the same way if I did not find the two persons sympathetic? I cannot tell.

To summarize the argument in this section: Modern workplaces are not only instrumental, alienating and dehumanizing; in fact they often explicitly accept and even expect personal involvement and engagement. The challenge is not the employees' right to be involved, that challenge is rather the fact that modern workplaces are so complex that being involved implies a vulnerability and risk that might explain why employees choose not to be involved.

The cases I will use to illustrate this were both, as I see it, examples of employees that became involved with their work situation (personalized it) to an extent that exceeded what they were prepared for. They both in a way entered the "risk zone" of involvement at work. As I as an Action Researcher in both case had influenced the developments that led up to this, I was also affected. Also it is important to notice that when this situation occurred, my role was not one of caring or helping, in fact I was as Action Researcher already involved myself. How should I handle this?

Respectful involvement presupposes that we have an initial opinion about the *other*, but it also implies that we have a sensitivity towards the *other* that challenges our predefined understanding of the *other*. Involvement forces and allows us to reflect on these sense-impressions. This type of involved relation and reflection is an essential part of our being; our existence as a human. In that I agree with Shotter (2004). But at the same time I think that we can be (and normally are) non-involved in the sense of playing roles, are inauthentic and do not reflect on our feelings towards the other, but act out routines and roles. We do that, I believe, without being *dehumanised*. That is, I will think that there is a middle ground or degrees of engagement between involvement and alienation. This middle ground is like our everyday presentation of our self (Goffman 1959), or role taking or what Etzioni calls calculative involvement.

The point I will make below is my reflection on how an Action Researcher can and should handle a situation of involvement, like my two cases. My argument is that it requires not only empathy, respect and personal understanding of the other, but also some degree of objectification, role taking and *respectful othering*. Being involved often implies to be in real time

situations that are ambiguous, complex and confusing. As a researcher you do not have the distance and often not even the time to reflect and gather enough information to support your choices. Still you are supposed to be a researcher and to represent some sort of objectivity. *Respectful othering* implies both skills and some wisdom when you do your judgments, but also ability to decompose the different processes that are at play; both to understand the other, to understand oneself, to understand one's relation to the other and to understand the situation this interaction is embedded in.

4. Knowledge through involvement – establishing internal validity

In this section I will try to answer my research question: how can we as social scientists research others through involvement, and develop true knowledge about the other, without "*othering*" them, that is, not objectifying them or making an instrument of our research, but rather be respectful of the *other* as a person? This is mainly a question about *research design principles.* Our challenge is to get intimate knowledge of the *other* in order to understand the uniqueness of the *other* as a person. But it is also to get a truthful understanding of the situation that you are involved in. I will refer to this as internal validity. *Internal validity* implies that we have been able to get a right understanding of the other, in accordance with his or her understanding of herself (authenticity). But it also implies getting beyond pure subjectivity and idiosyncrasy. It implies also understanding the situation and the context that the other is part of.

Based on the discussion in section 3, I will make a division between four areas of knowledge that we are likely to find in an involved research situation: knowledge about *oneself*, knowledge about *the other*, knowledge about the *relation* and knowledge about *the situation*. These areas of knowledge exist in a totality and not as separate domains; however, by decomposing the knowledge generation process into these four areas, it will be easier to identify the different knowledge elements.[20] I will use the two cases I have pre-

[20] My model has only two persons, where we can think of the "I" person as a researcher who gets involved with another person. My discussion does not extend beyond this social setting. As will also be seen from my discussion, each of the four areas of

sented as illustrations of my more general and abstract point. My two cases do not illustrate all there is to say about this, but I think they illuminate some of the main points.

Self-reflective knowledge

I have argued that deep or real involvement has an effect on oneself. That is, if I am really involved, it will probably affect me and do something to me; my values are challenged, I am in a sense transformed, or my insights are changed, in ways that influence how I perceive and interpret situations. If so, it challenges my "scientific" pretension of being an objective observer, or at least to stand for a stable consistent reporting of an event. This was what I experienced in both of the cases to which I have referred above.

In both cases I found myself in a position when the critical incidents occurred, that I was not prepared for. I had not foreseen that my relation to the union leader (case 1) and the team leader (case 2) was that personal. Our way of conversation changed during the process from politeness and more formal discussions to being very emotional and personal. I had to rethink if I was up to that, if this was what I really wanted, and if I believed in the whole project we were involved in. I really questioned whether I should continue as a researcher.

But what might I learn from this type of transformation, and how can I make a true report if I myself am transformed? Being alert to how situations and events influence my perception might give me valuable knowledge. This self reflective knowledge that comes from a self transformation through interaction with others, is a sort of basic learning and socialization process in society. It is what G. H. Mead (1962) referred to as individual development, that allows us to understand orders and forms in society. Subsequently it is learning and transformation that goes beyond the individual event, and allows

knowledge touch on larger theoretical fields of which I can here only scratch the surface. However, the intention is not to give a theoretical contribution to each of these fields but to indicate some categories of knowledge that are related to each area or field.

us to understand not only what happened in that particular situation, but also about social forms.[21]

An important aspect of Habermas' communicative project has been to derive how cognitive and normative structures, being aimed at mutual understanding, are transformed through language and the communicative process. To establish such connections, one can turn to developmental psychology (Dryzek 1996). Communicative action has in it a strong development element, since participation in communicative and involved processes contributes to personal development and growth. This development perspective is referred to as the *self-transformation* thesis (Warren 1992). Broadly, this thesis argues that the individual, through participation in the democratic communicative processes, over time develops a democratic mind. This implies, in other words, that over time the communicative processes will result in communicative action, as opposed to strategic action by the individual.[22]

One can also see this self-reflection knowledge as a sort of phenomenology of involvement that influences our meaning system. Phenomenology, using Max Scheler (1973: 137) is a sort of grounded approach, where one poses fundamental questions about phenomena one experiences in close

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[21] It is also this insight by Mead that Habermas relies on when he talks about communicative action, and we might also link it to Argyris' (2004) concept of model II learning. In both these theoretical perspectives it is a reflection on self-transformation that leads to insight into our cognitive "structure" (Gustavsen 1992; Johnsen 2001).

[22] It must be emphasized that, as I see it, the self-transformation hypothesis is not the same as an internalizing process. Internalization would mean the same as what I referred to as Giddens' social consciousness theory above. I think we can reject that and still talk about self transformation. My use of self-transformation will then mean that the individual does not internalize a set of values at the sacrifice of own reflexivity. The self-transformation applies to the transition from strategic to communicative action, or rather – the transition from a strategic to a communicative mind. To some extent, one could say that this idea of self-transformation is in conflict with the idea of an autonomous, reflective mind, however I should like to see it rather as a term that describes what happens as a consequence of our reflections. By framing self transformation this way, as a learning process, allows us to consider situations where the transformation goes from involved to strategic action.

(subjective) encounters. It is a reflection based on a (more or less) suspension of predefined assumptions (Isaacs 1999).[23]

Given then the approach to self transformation presented here, and based on this brief discussion of the theme and a position that I will argue is rather normative, one might ask what sort of knowledge this process provides. We might expect that the researcher in an involved situation will be able to report how involvement has changed her experience (meaning system), and also what reflection this has led to. We will expect that the researcher also reports what is the most honest implication that one might draw from this experience. But, as noted above, the researcher might not be able to fully account for her motives.

It is also logical that the further reporting of that event is made on the basis of this new insight, and that this will be different from what was the perspective when the process started. The main point here is that the sort of existential, phenomenological self reflection that high involvement implies might bring you out of your professional role as a researcher, and you encounter the field as "yourself only".[24]

As a researcher you become the real receiver, a subject in social science, as discussed among others by John Law (2004). In principle this is no new acknowledgement; social scientists have more or less always been participants and thereby acknowledge their subjective account of their observation. The point I make here goes beyond this. It argues that real involved research (as I have defined it) implies a level of subjective transformation that really challenges the researcher's self. I believe that in an involved situation, the

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[23] Although both Heidegger (2007) and Gadamer (2006) will argue that we always have pre-understanding. However we might talk about degrees of defensive mechanisms and Gadamer talks about a self reflection in the sense of reflection over the way you reflect. It is a sort of coming out of *hermeneutic circles*, to be able to have a critical perspective of what one perceives. In Schütz' terms, we can talk about schemes of experience (Schütz 1972: 82). Cf. critique of (EPOKHÊ – Husserl) in Eikeland (1997) and in more practical terms we might link this to the concept of sense making (Weick 1995). However, as argued here, the frame of reference will always refer back to society (Holzner 1968).

[24] This is a complicated sentence, for sure, but I assume that the common sense meaning is clear, it assumes that your professional role is different from you as a private person.

subjective perception of the researcher is of great importance to the knowledge that is constructed or produced.

Returning to my own experience, it implied that as the two persons I was engaged with went into a situation where they questioned their identity, their whole project and their reason for having the job they had, similar issues came up in my mind. I easily saw that their discussions and expressions touched me with sympathy to the extent that I could identify with their situation. Subsequently, as for instance linked to my dialogue with the team leader, my own disappointments and defeats in work life, came to mind. In my responding, I probably mixed up her and my own situation.

Knowledge about the other

Knowledge about the *other* must be seen in relation to self reflection knowledge (Schütz 1972). Your self reflection will have told you something about your ability and willingness to encounter the *other*, your values in relation to meeting the *other* and the repertoire of senses that you will use in interpreting the *other* (Ricæur 1992). The essential thing here is that high *involvement* implies that you see not only yourself above roles, norms and forms, but you see the *other* that way too. The *other* becomes a subject, not an object for you. If not, the *other* will not reveal her more inner self to you. This of course presupposes that your attention is not only towards self reflection, but that you are empathic, altruistically or sincerely interested in the other. The *other* must be a subject, not an object to you.[25]

Closeness to the *other* implies a whole set of ethical issues. *Closeness ethics* (Levinas, Buber) is a very normative approach to discussing these relations as well as implying an ontological and epistemological position. It makes the argument that ethics is more fundamental than thought and action, it is prior to thought. The terms of *It* and *Thou* could be a useful and essential one to illustrate this. I use Buber as a reference here: I can remain unaffected by an encounter with It, but encountering a Thou, going into a relation, does something with me. I am not unaffected by a Thou relation. What Buber

[25] See Sonntag (2003) on how we can observe the pain of others without being affected.

(1970) indicates, is that we pass a threshold when we go from an I – It situation to an I – Thou situation. While the first is based on causality and calculation, the second is a relation. In my terminology, the I – Thou relation requires a different and more personal involvement and trust, than the I – It situation. What then, is the nature of the I – Thou relation?

Furthermore, we can discover and disclose this ethic in closeness with "*the other*", see the other in their eyes. Following this position, real, intimate involvement gives us access to (ethical) knowledge that we would not have without involvement. The *other* as a real, human being brings a dimension to our perception or is the foundation of our perception. The *other* is not a thing, but opens a universe to us. We see ourselves in the *other*, and we see the *other* not only as an object but as a subject. In Levinas' (1972) words, the *other* becomes a window into myself.[26]

Again drawing from my two cases, I think that what happens in real life is that you develop a sort of sympathy for the *other*. I think this sympathy is important for you to see aspects of the other that were previously not apparent. The union leader suddenly appeared as a different person when he called me and asked for personal advice. He revealed his vulnerability, and thereby suddenly was to me, not only the tough and somewhat one-dimensional union leader, but a more complex and thoughtful person. This insight also allowed me to see his arguments and why he had mistrusted management in a more sympathetic way. At the same time it implied that I had the possibility to talk to him in a different way and also be more open with my own reflections.

With the team leader (case 2), the situation was somewhat different. First of all, the challenge she faced was much more negative (the change process was less in her favour). Secondly she reacted very emotional, and as she was a woman and I a male, I found it difficult to be very intimate. I also found it more difficult to understand her emotional behavior. Subsequently, I probably distanced myself more and had less chance to get a deep and true insight into her situation. A question here would be what I could, given the situation, use such an insight for?

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[26] See Paul Ricoæur (1992), yourself as the other, a symbiosis that establishes the other as an ontology.

The practical aspect of the type of involvement I discuss here, is that involvement gives insight into the *intention* of the *other* (authenticity) that thereby can be communicated outside this relation, and by that one avoids stigmatization and objectification of the *other*. If I am involved with another, I will know or disclose that person's sincerity, motives and individuality. Involvement gives me insight into the unique in the *other*[27]. As a researcher, I can then report about this uniqueness and truthfulness of the *other* (her real intentions)[28] that I would not have had access to if I was not involved**.**

But having said this, I believe I have also outlined how vulnerable and complicated such a relation and insight is. It requires special skills and wisdom, and probably a good fit between me as a researcher and the other. Had I in both cases been wiser, I should have prepared the two for situations like the ones that occurred. That might have allowed us to know each other better in advance, and might have improved the dialogue when the critical situation occurred. But personal skills also play a role. It is probable that what I as a researcher am able to perceive from this type of relation is very much defined by my own repertoire of emotions and experiences[29].

Knowledge about the relation

To engage in involved relations is to try to reach co-ordination and common understanding, what Habermas (1997) refers to as communicative action, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call cooperative knowledge. But communicative action does not mean co-ordinating individual meaning, values and

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[27] Alfred Schütz (1972) talks about a *stream of consciousness* that we apply in our interpretation of the other in order to be alert and have a *spontaneous experience* of the other. This might bring us towards a genuine understanding of the other in a dialogue of simultaneous and bodily expressions. This way of seeing the other is contrasted with a more abstract understanding (typology, categorisation, etc).

[28] See for instance Charles Taylor (1998) in *Autentisitetens etikk* who refers to George Herbert Mead (1962) called "significant other". The human mind is not monological but dialogical.

[29] As Susan Sontag (2003) observes, being sentimental to others' pain does not imply that one really cares, suffers and is effected by the other. Subsequently, sentimentality can be a purely egoistic emotion.

beliefs. Communicative action aims at reaching a common, valid description that is true and legitimate. It is this process of finding a true and legitimate description of a phenomenon in a communication that is referred to as the process of *interpretation*. The relation creates an inter-subjective reality, an *agora* or a *communicative community.*[30] This more practical aspect of closeness is sensitive to how close you are able to get to the *other* and how trustful the relation is.

The process of mutual interpretation, that of finding mutual and valid descriptions of the objective and the social world, presupposes a subject. This subject can relate to the social and objective worlds in different ways characterized by different types of acts. The subject exists in his or her *lifeworld*. Habermas, however, does not ascribe to subjects characteristics like identity or alienation. That is so because of the subject's ontological independence. However there is a coupling between the self and the social world, as the meaning construction through communicative action is the way the individual builds relations between herself and the social world.[31]

There are two main dimensions of this relation, the one is reciprocal, the other centres on each individual's recognition. When the subject is involved in the relation, she/he takes part in a communicative process. The outcome of this process is a new, better and or common interpretation of the world. The process of reaching a common understanding (as distinct from common meaning or beliefs) takes part in a social process within a set of norms and rules, in a *discourse*. So we can see the involved relation as a formation of an inter-subjective, particular and unique discourse. In Shotter's words, the reciprocity in an "ideal talk situation" creates humanity: "…people's local, living, spontaneously responsive connections to each other…" (Shotter 2004: 31).

What is important here seen in relation to involved research is that the research situation is a formal situation, a formal and limited relationship. I do

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30 See Habermas (1997); on Agora, see Nowotny et al. (2001).

31 This is "the young" Wittgenstein's point, that language is the only way by which we can reach out of one self, and language is by its nature a social phenomenon. So expressing oneself in words, means to make social sense of one self, make one self social (Wittgenstein 2001).

not think there are absolute truths about how this relationship should be, but it is different from friendship. You might be emotionally and personally involved as researcher, but you are still a researcher. From my two cases I realize that it is difficult to draw boundaries on the relation. You probably can not foresee what sympathies and developments in the relation to the other will occur during the process. What I think could be a way of avoiding that this becomes a problem, is to have an open reflection on the relation. This implies to have both parties developing a mutual understanding of this relation. In my case, I should have done this, had I been more experienced.

This raises an interesting question that I will not go into, but that could be of interest to the study of involved research. It is not only the case that reciprocity implies that the researcher "enters into" the lifeworld of the *other*, but also that the *other* enters into the lifeworld of the researcher. If so, should not the subject also care about the researcher? It is well known that the researcher influences the *other*. What might happen is that the other behaves or responds to the researcher in ways that are supported to confirm the researcher's assumptions and pre-understandings. The object might adopt the researcher's language and concepts of describing her situation.

My point then is that through this process of mutual understanding, we already engage in a process of *objectification*. In the process of interpretation we bring in our pre-understandings and our references to the "outside" world. Language links us to the outside world. Putting our experiences into language, means a sort of socializing these experiences, put them into categories that are defined by language (Wittgenstein 2001).

What knowledge does this relation (discourse) give us? First of all, as with any discourse, the process is that of testing arguments against each other, and thereby developing better arguments. The relation gives us the possibility to test assumptions, and thereby develop a mutual understanding. Through this relation, we learn to know the *other* for good and bad. We learn about limitations and about preconditions. In the relation we influence each other. Asking questions might bring about awareness on issues that the *other* did not have in mind. The researcher thereby contributes to the relation, and in that respect is a participant rather than only a spectator (Skjervheim 1959).

The quality of what we observe then has to do with the quality of that relation that, among others, points back to qualities of the researcher.

Having said this, I think it is also right to say that such a mutual understanding of a relation can have the consequences of limiting the insight one will have in each other. It establishes a sort of area of appropriateness that both parties relate to. It is the sort of mutual contract you are working on. Drawing this line of appropriateness became important in both the cases I have presented.

Knowledge about the situation

The *situation* is where the self, the other and the relation expose themselves. The situation is the structure and conditions under which this meeting takes place. It is the external dimension of this meeting and this relation. This external system dimension is already present when we talk to the other (ref Habermas referred earlier and Levinas when he talks about the one, the second and the third (which we can interpret as society or humanity).[32] The discourse that develops in the relation is not exposed in isolation, but within the context of the situation. Even spontaneous reactions that one might have on others' expressions will normally reveal pre-understandings and expectations that are rooted in conventions and norms in society.

There is a degree of personal choice in every situation and thereby the possibility for different outcomes of the relations, that is: different levels of closeness and trust in the situation. But I do believe that we can talk about the *logic of a situation* (Holzner 1968; Popper 1979; Barwise/Parry 1986; Barwise 1989). A company and a workplace represent such a logic. A workplace is a formal structure with division of power, position and labour. As Giddens writes:

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[32] There is in Levinas' (1972) and Ricoeur's (1992) theorising an intersubjective normativity that develops as a consequence of our encounter with the other. With the facing of the other, we run into a responsibility for the other's well being. This awareness of a responsibility towards the other is present in any dialogue and also the awareness of the other is part of what forms the dialogue. Ethical reflection of a general kind, as something beyond the unique encounter, is thereby present in the encounter.

> "structure is regarded as rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction; institutionalized features of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilized across time and space." (Giddens 1984: xxxi)

Social structures are more or less present in a given situation and more or less formalized.

A personal meeting, as a unique personal event between two persons, is by its nature more open and undecided, and thereby different from a formal encounter in, for instance, a formal work environment. A formal work environment will by nature thrive on stability and reproduction. If the two are confused, the unique encounter and the formal meeting, there will be a conflict of situational logics. This is to some extent seen with emotional labour, or very personal service encounters (Hochschild 1983). What often happens in such mixed situations is that the logics are mediated. In such cases, one finds a way to be both human and sensitive and still relate to the formal structures of the situation.

The critical incidents in my two cases were of this kind. They created mixed situations and confusion of roles. In case 1, with the union leader, I experienced the situation as all in all positive. I believed in the project we were running. I was convinced that co-operation in the company would be better than the conflict they had for years. I saw and identified with the dilemma that the union leader had come into, but I was convinced that he would be better off if he trusted management and involved in co-operation. I and the team of researchers I was part of, demanded that any change towards a new regime of collaboration should be stated in a contract between management and union so that none of the parties should be tempted to behave opportunistically. We as researchers would supervise the further process to see that it was fair and according to intentions.

With the team leader in the hotel, the situation was different. The new owner, a large hotel chain, had different concepts for organizing and managing than the ones we had proposed. Since we disagreed with the changes, it was easier to play into the negative emotions of the team leader. On the other hand, I found it difficult, and quite a dilemma, to take the role of undermining the new management. The situation here was quite complicated. I could be

sympathetic to the team leader, but I could do little to change the situation. It was a sort of *social fact* that the hotel would adopt a different management policy. My sympathy with the team leader could not change or conceal that.

Subsequently the personal encounter and high involvement is spelled out within the *constraints of a situation*. To some extent this situation is a perception, and there is not only one situation, for example within an organization.[33] In addition to this mere personal structuring, there are some situational logics that we need to comply with. The relative importance of the situation will vary between encounters, but I believe that we always have a reference to something beyond the unique moment of personal involvement and interaction.

My further argument is, in accordance with my discussion about involvement, that situational logics are something we move in and out of, and that we can have some sort of control of. That is, we can for instance choose to refer to formal constraints in the situation in order to increase stability and control, and decrease uniqueness and intimacy. Structure and logics of situations are not only imposed constraints, they might be chosen constraints. How the other chooses to refer to these constraints will tell us something about the willingness to accept closeness and openness.[34]

Summaries: decomposing the situation of involvement

The point I have tried to make is that by decomposing, analyzing or deconstructing *the involved situation* between the researcher and a subject, we can see how different knowledge elements stand in relation to each other. What I believe happens when we are involved is that we try to make meaning out of the knowledge involvement gives us. Our self reflection, the knowledge about the relation, the *other* and the situation, all have somehow to make sense. If it does not make sense, we probably search for explanations. Not all

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[33] A reference here is Merleau-Ponty (1989) and his phenomenology, where he argues that in a situation in the present there is an intuition of former present and recollections, that creates continuity and unity between the past and the present.

[34] Talking within and about the situation, in and out of roles, back stage / on stage is an approach to organizational learning see Eikeland (1997).

of us are equally sensible to a situation, or equally wise or skillful to handle them, and often we will ignore information that does not make sense. Some will be more sensitive and identify more knowledge through involvement than others. This then indicates that the researcher plays a subjective role in involved research. Sometimes experiences from involvement might be shocking (Holzner 1968). Shocking experiences will mean that we have to investigate further if this is true and might subsequently help us to start reconsidering beliefs and values. My two cases were not of this kind, but they were challenging and made an impact on me.

This discussion therefore shows that there are limits to involved knowledge. Research can never reach into the lifeworld of *others* as such, only to parts of it since lifeworlds are at least partly, common. Real humanism and respect for *others* in my mind implies that there are limits to scientific knowledge, and there are limits to what level of personal knowledge that social science should strive at. So, instead of having an argument where intimate lifeworld knowledge is contrasted to more objective, system world knowledge, I believe we can have a more fruitful discussion if we discuss what type of knowledge involvement gives us, and what part of that knowledge is relevant outside the lifeworld situation.

Furthermore, I think the discussion shows that involved research really is an inter-subjective activity that already, at a dyadic level, produces social rather than individual lifeworld knowledge. This social knowledge has taken the lifeworld knowledge of the other at least one step in direction of structuring, classifying and objectifying. It has become, what Schütz (1972) and Searle (1995) refer to as *social facts*.

Being an involved researcher is difficult and requires special skills. It also requires a lot of the other, and of the situation one is in. Research, aiming at co-generated knowledge and at being useful and contribute to change, has to happen in close co-operation with those that the research concerns, subsequently they themselves are partly responsible for a successful outcome. Even if these requirements are met, the researcher cannot report the full and real lifeworld experience. All reporting will have to imply some sort of normalization, co-generated, inter-subjective categorization. Involved research will thereby imply a sort of objectification of the observations and

experiences. However, this need not come into conflict with being human, understanding and respectful. In fact, the key to good research practice (leading up to internal validity) is to be found in the *skills* that the researcher has, related to the issues and challenges that an involved situation requires. Done in the right way, this will provide *respectful othering*.

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